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Han-Tang Zhongguo Gudianwu and the Problem of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Dance: Sixty Years of Controversy

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Han-Tang *Zhongguo Gudianwu* and the Problem of Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Dance: Sixty Years of Creation and Controversy

Emily Wilcox

In 1979, after twenty-one years of political reeducation, Chinese classical dance professor Sun Ying (孙颖, 1929–2009) returned to the Beijing Dance Academy to instigate reform in the field of Zhongguo gudianwu, *the official national dance form of the People's Republic of China. In creating the Han-Tang style of* Zhongguo gudianwu, *Sun challenged accepted notions of Chineseness within the field, especially the idea that Chinese indigenous theater, or* xiqu, *should serve as the primary foundation for a distinctively Chinese national body aesthetic. While Sun's alternative vision of Chineseness produced extensive controversy, this controversy is not antithetical to the historical aims and assumptions of* Zhongguo gudianwu. *Since the founding of the field in the early 1950s, practitioners of* Zhongguo gudianwu *have treated Chineseness as a subject for creative invention, interpretation, and debate; therefore, Sun's work is not a post-Mao phenomenon but rather an extension of the art and politics of the Mao period.*

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Introducing Sun Ying

It is December, 2008, and a debate erupts among a group of faculty members at the Beijing Dance Academy, the oldest and most

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prestigious conservatory for dance in China.[1] At the center of the controversy is Sun Ying (孙颖, 1929–2009), a male professor who heads the Academy's Han-Tang (汉唐) Program, a subfield within the Department of *Zhongguo gudianwu* (中国古典舞), or contemporary Chinese classical dance (Figure 1 and Plate 6). Sun is accustomed to being at odds with the academy establishment, and today it is one of his master's students in the Han-Tang Program whose thesis topic defense has brought the group together and aroused discontent. Sun is almost eighty years old, and as he defends his student against the criticisms of the other faculty, he addresses them with the commanding tone of a teacher talking to a group of students. Sun shakes his body with visible passion as he speaks, making his dark hairs quiver around his temples, and he takes breaks with long drags on his cigarettes, filling the room with a smoky haze. On the table next to Sun's cigarettes sit a pair of white riding gloves and black sunglasses, which Sun wears when he drives to and from campus on his white motor scooter. He has on the black canvas shoes with white soles often worn by martial arts teachers, and on his left pinky finger sits a gold ring set with a black stone that shimmers like a giant crystal under the florescent lights.

Sun is part of what dancers in China call "the old generation" (Figure 2).[2] Born in 1929 in northeast China, Sun was twenty when the

FIGURE 1. Students in a Han-Tang technique class at the Beijing Dance Academy, 2008. (Photo: Emily Wilcox)

People's Republic was established in 1949. During his youth, Sun personally experienced traditional-style schooling in the Confucian classics, as well as the social chaos of almost two decades of continuous war, poverty, and political upheaval. After studying dance in an early war-era propaganda performance troupe, Sun was invited to participate in the first state-sponsored Dance Cadre Training Course held at the Central Drama Academy in Beijing in 1951.[3] There, Sun studied with teacher Wu Xiaobang (吴晓邦, 1906–1995), the Chinese revolutionary dance pioneer known as the Father of Chinese New Dance.[4] When the Beijing Dance School (predecessor of the Beijing Dance Academy) was established in 1954, Sun joined as an original faculty member. He helped develop the first teaching curriculum in *Zhongguo gudianwu* and taught the first generation of professionally-trained dancers in the People's Republic of China.

Even as a young man Sun was something of a maverick in the dance world. Like his teacher Wu Xiaobang, Sun disagreed with many of the early practices at the Beijing Dance School. When Wu refused to serve as the Beijing Dance School's founding president in 1954, Sun personally witnessed Wu tear up the letter of invitation, an experience that Sun says left a deep impression on him. Although Sun joined the

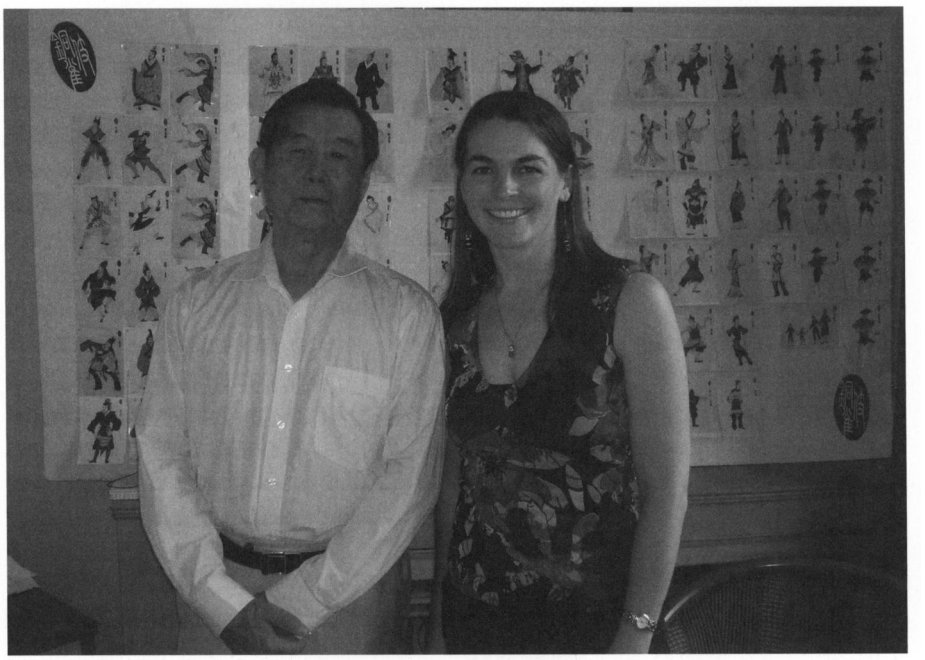

FIGURE 2. Sun Ying and Emily Wilcox in front of costume design renderings for the 2009 restaging of *Tongque Ji*. (Photo: Chen Jie)

school's faculty, he was often outspoken about his criticisms and ideas for change. One point upon which both Wu and Sun leveled criticism against the school establishment was its reliance on Soviet ballet experts for advice in establishing new curricula and institutional practices. When elements of ballet training were adopted into the Chinese dance curriculum, Sun voiced strong objections, and he tried to organize meetings to discuss this and other problems. Sun's outspokenness on professional matters made him a target for political criticism, and in 1957 Sun was labeled a "rightist" and "counterrevolutionary" by colleagues and leaders at the Beijing Dance School. Sun's opponents were aided in their argument by the fact that Sun had worked briefly as a scribe for a Kuomintang officer near the end of the Chinese Civil War. Although Sun says that he joined the Kuomintang not for political reasons but merely as a way to get food, the choice left a political mark on Sun's record that haunted him for decades. In 1958, Sun was forced down to the countryside to participate in labor camps for political offenders. He remained there, through the numerous political movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), until 1979, for a total of twenty-one years.

The Han-Tang School

When Sun returned to the Beijing Dance School in 1979, he was determined to continue the work he had left behind in the 1950s and to make up for his lost years of professional productivity. Unlike other victims of political persecution, many of whom lost their professional ambitions, if not their lives, during time in political reeducation, Sun returned with an even stronger determination to make a mark in his field. Like Sun, however, the Dance School establishment also returned, after years of political upheaval and upset, to many of its earlier commitments. Among these were a continued resistance to Sun's ideas and criticisms. While Sun's political status was rehabilitated in 1979, his professional status was not. Instead of being reassigned to the position of dance instructor, the title he held before 1958, Sun was instead offered the position of head librarian.

Restricted from the sacred space of the dance classroom, Sun began spreading his ideas by writing academic articles critical of existing practices in *Zhongguo gudianwu*, his area of interest and expertise, many of which were published in *Wudao* (舞蹈, Dance) magazine in the 1980s.[5] Sun found opportunities to choreograph and teach outside the School. In 1985, through collaboration with the China Opera and Dance Theater (中国歌剧舞剧院), Sun created his first original full-length dance-drama, *Tongque ji* (铜雀伎, Dancer of the Tongque Stage),[6] which premiered in Beijing in 1985. Set in the Wei-Jin period

(220–420 CE), *Tongque ji* tells the fictional story of two court dancers, Zheng Feipeng and Wei Sinu, who are tragically driven out of the Tongque Stage after the death of the Wei leader Cao Cao (155–220 CE) (Plates 7 and 8). The movement vocabulary, costumes, and props used in *Tongque ji* include hand and foot drums and swaying body positions inspired by research on Han and Wei-Jin performance and aesthetic forms. This new movement vocabulary and choreographic aesthetic became the basis for Sun's new dance style, what became known as the Han-Tang school (汉唐派) of *Zhongguo gudianwu* (Figure 3 and 4).

Like many of the great innovators in twentieth-century American dance, such as George Balanchine, Martha Graham, and many others, Sun's goal in creating the Han-Tang school was to break with existing dance methods and techniques and to establish his own distinctive dance style. The Han-Tang school, named after the Han and Tang dynasties from Chinese history, became Sun's signature program for teaching and choreography in Chinese dance. From the early 1980s until his death in 2009, Sun worked continually to establish his style, producing a large performance repertoire, a complete new teaching curriculum, and extensive supporting theoretical writings. In an authoritative account of the history of contemporary Chinese dance-drama, Chinese dance historian and critic Yu Ping describes Sun's 1985 dance-drama *Tongque ji* as one of the most innovative works of twentieth-century Chinese dance-drama. Yu writes, "On the [various schools] of the 'classical' ladder, *Tongque ji* [. . .] expresses the most thorough consciousness of innovation" (Yu 2004: 119).[7] Apart from serving as innovative choreography, Yu argues that *Tongque ji* demonstrates a larger goal to transform the entire movement vocabulary and aesthetic standards of the field of contemporary Chinese classical dance. *Tongque ji* shows, Yu argues, "Motivation and accomplishment . . . [to] completely change the movement method and aesthetic direction of *Zhongguo gudianwu*" (Yu 2004: 133).

Following the success of *Tongque ji* in 1985, Sun accomplished two more major milestones in 1997 and 2001, which confirmed his status as one of the most important choreographers working in the area of *Zhongguo gudianwu*. In 1997, Sun's female group dance *Ta Ge* (踏歌, Foot Stamp Song)[8] won the gold medal in Chinese dance at the national Lotus Cup dance competition, bringing Sun's work the attention of mainstream media and nonspecialist audiences. *Ta Ge* is five minutes in length and features twelve dancers in matching green long-sleeved V-neck robes tapping their feet on the ground and singing as they sway their hips and heads side to side and toss their sleeves into the air.[9] *Ta Ge* became one of the most commonly performed pieces in the *Zhongguo gudianwu* repertoire, and new works by dance troupes and schools

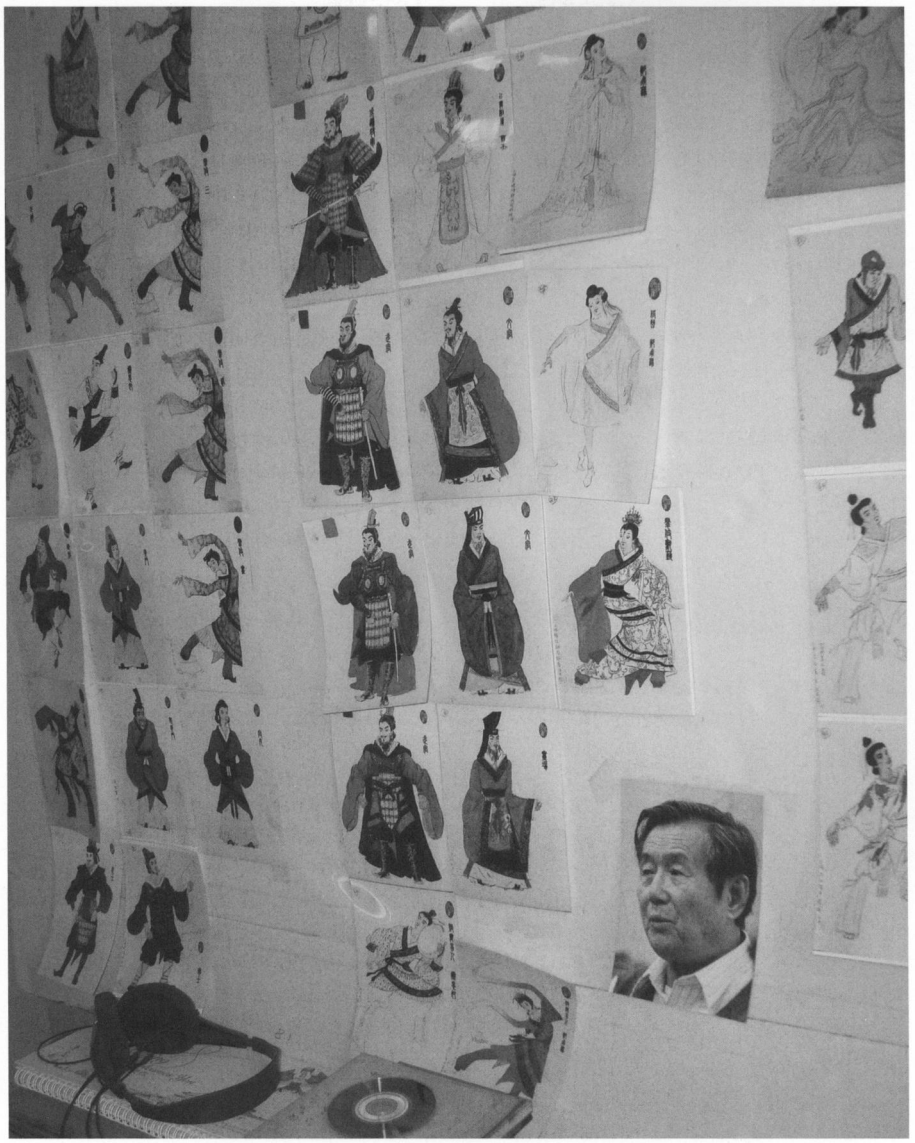

FIGURE 3. Costume design renderings for the 2009 restaging of *Tongque ji*, with photo of Sun Ying in bottom right in Beijing in 2008. (Photo: Emily Wilcox)

around China began to imitate it in style and structure (Plate 6). Following Sun's success as a choreographer, the Beijing Dance Academy created an undergraduate degree program and research institute dedicated to Sun's Han-Tang school, with Sun appointed as the director and primary instructor. The Han-Tang program recruited its first class of students in 2001, marking the first time a degree-granting program

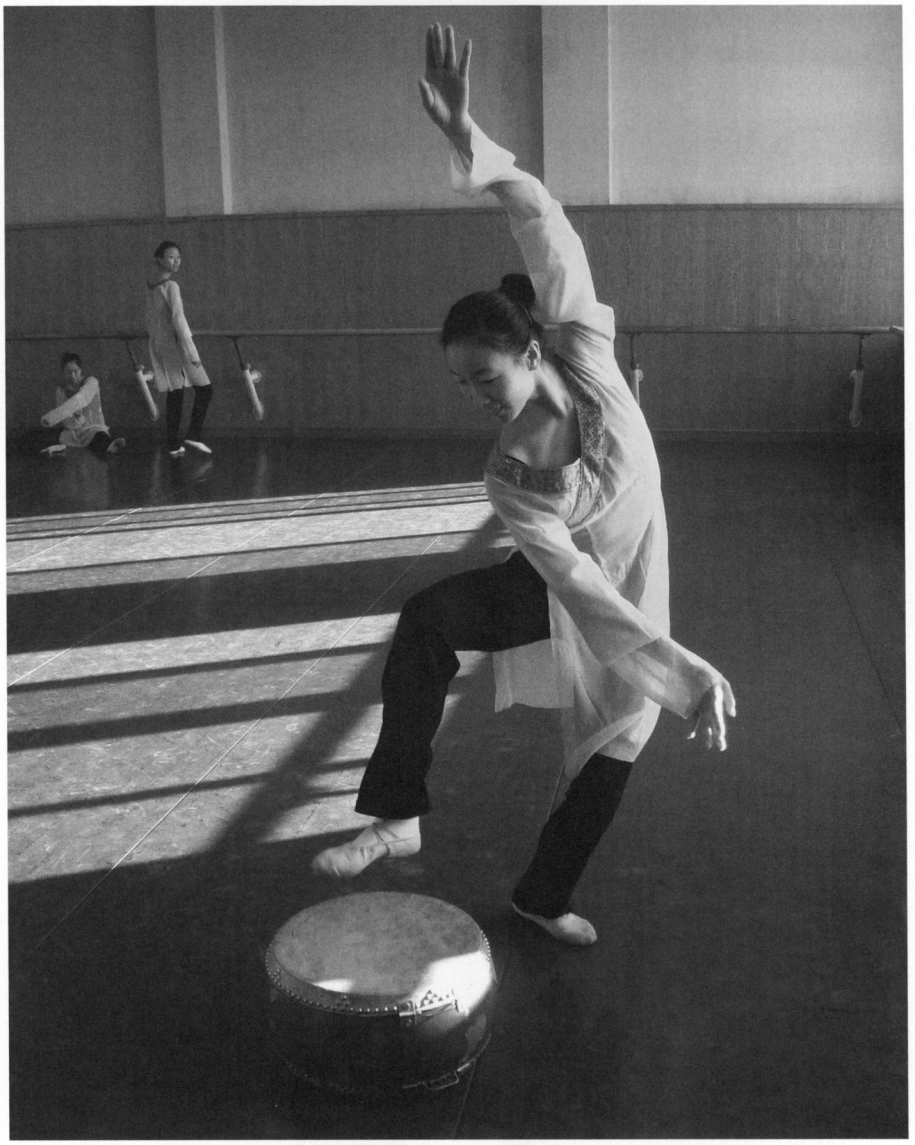

FIGURE 4. Student practicing a Han-Tang foot drum technique routine at the Beijing Dance Academy in Beijing in 2009. (Photo: Emily Wilcox)

at the Beijing Dance Academy was set up based on the artistic work of a single choreographer. In 2010, the Han-Tang program published its own written curriculum for Han-Tang style basic training for *Zhongguo gudianwu* (Sun 2010a), and in 2010 it recruited its sixth undergraduate class of Han-Tang *Zhongguo gudianwu* majors.

The Problem of "National Character" (民族性)

While Sun's critical approach and focus on innovation make him comparable to renowned figures in mainstream American dance, there is an important characteristic of the Han-Tang school that makes Sun and the entire terrain of innovation and debate in contemporary Chinese dance more generally different from debates in American dance. That difference is the problem of Chineseness. By "the problem of Chineseness," I do not mean some inherent or monolithic cultural quality that makes the process of making and debating dance in China different from that in other places. Rather, the problem of Chineseness is the self-conscious preoccupation of Chinese dancers with creating dance that is distinctively Chinese. The problem of Chineseness developed out of a particular history of cultural reflexivity and nationalistic concerns during the early twentieth century in which Chinese dancers, like artists in other fields, felt it was important to develop a uniquely Chinese "national dance form" (民族舞蹈形式).[10] It resulted in a situation in which much of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Chinese dance, Sun's work included, is explicitly aimed at embodying and promoting a quality know as *minzuxing* (民族性), or "national character." Achievement in the world of Chinese dance is to embody and promote national character, or Chineseness, in dance form. The fiercest debates in the world of contemporary Chinese dance continue to be over what constitutes Chineseness and how to better make dance Chinese.

Chineseness serves as an inherent part of the creative logic of all dance forms in China, since it is the most basic categorizing principle used in contemporary Chinese dance. Contemporary Chinese dance, which here refers to the range of forms recognized and practiced by the professional dance community in the People's Republic of China, is usually divided into two large categories: First, there is Chinese dance (中国舞蹈, or sometimes 民族舞蹈), which includes Chinese classical dance (*Zhongguo gudianwu* 中国古典舞), Chinese folk dance (*Zhongguo minjian wudao* 中国民间舞蹈), Chinese ethnic minority dance (*Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wudao* 中国少数民族舞蹈[11]), Chinese military dance (*Zhongguo junlü wudao* 中国军旅舞蹈), and Chinese revolutionary ballet (*Zhongguo geming baleiwu* 中国革命芭蕾舞); second, there is non-Chinese or "Western" dance (西方舞蹈), which includes ballet (*baleiwu* 芭蕾舞), Western character dance (*xifang xingge wudao* 西方性格舞), modern dance (*xiandaiwu* 现代舞),[12] international-style competitive ballroom dance or dancesport (*guobiaowu* 国标舞), jazz (*jueshiwu* 爵士舞), hip-hop/street dance (*jiewu* 街舞), and so on.[13] In 1957, the first and most lasting disciplinary division took place at the Beijing Dance School. Known as *fenke* (分科), or "dividing the disciplines," this divi-

sion broke the school into two separate programs, one called Chinese National Dance-Drama (中国民族舞剧科) and the other European Ballet Dance-Drama (欧洲芭蕾舞剧科).[14] In 2009, these distinctions still existed at the Beijing Dance Academy and its affiliated professional dance secondary school. For example, students at the Beijing Dance Academy Attached Secondary School choose between two majors: Chinese dance and Western dance. Also, the choreography department at the Beijing Dance Academy offers two separate dance choreography majors, one for Chinese dance and one for modern dance. Based on this fundamental division between Chinese and Western dance, all forms of contemporary Chinese dance define their position and significance in some relation to Chineseness as a central organizing concept.

Gudianwu, Making China's National Dance Form

The genre of contemporary Chinese dance historically most concerned with Chineseness is *Zhongguo gudianwu,* the same field in which Sun's Han-Tang school emerged as a subdiscipline and internal critique in the 1980s (Figure 5). *Zhongguo gudianwu* was created in the 1950s as a national dance form that was meant to be a Chinese alternative to European classical ballet. In the accepted historiography,[15] the earliest efforts to create *Zhongguo gudianwu* are attributed to three individuals: Korean dancer Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi (Chinese name Cui Chengxi 崔承喜 1911–1969),[16] Chinese theater expert Ouyang Yuq-

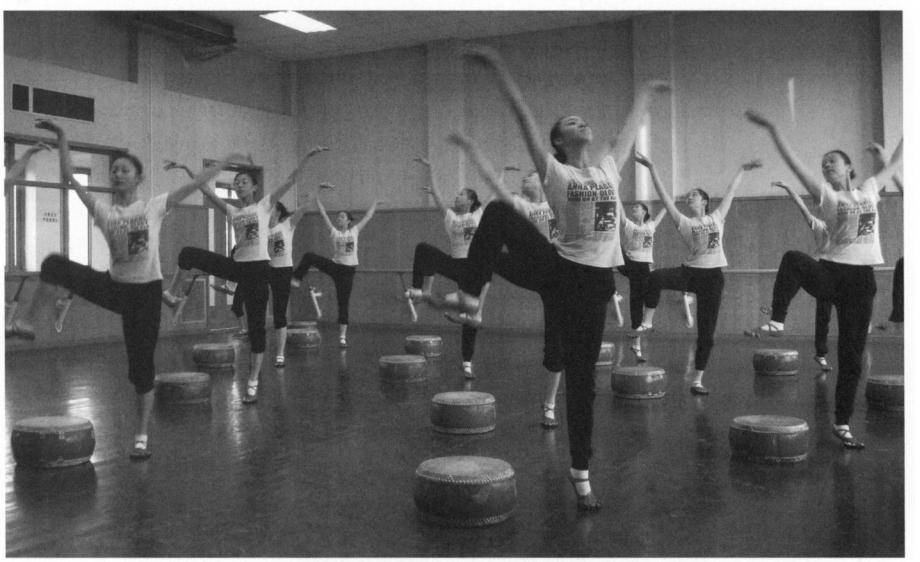

FIGURE 5. Students practicing a Han-Tang foot drum technique routine at the Beijing Dance Academy in Beijing in 2009. (Photo: Emily Wilcox)

ian (欧阳予倩 1889–1962), and Chinese dance education specialist Ye Ning (叶宁 b. 1919). In 1950–1954, with the support of the Chinese Ministry of Culture, Ch'oe, Ouyang, and Ye helped established and lead *gudianwu* research groups at major performing arts institutions in Beijing, including the Beijing People's Art Theater Dance Troupe, the Central Drama Academy, and the Beijing Dance Academy. Members of these groups conducted research on indigenous Chinese performance and martial arts with the goal of developing a unified and distinctively Chinese system for dance training and choreography.

Zhongguo gudianwu stands out as the most important site for exploring the problem of Chineseness in Chinese dance because it aims to embody a shared cultural quality of all Chinese people. Apart from *Zhongguo gudianwu,* the other most widely practiced form of Chinese dance in the PRC is Chinese folk and ethnic dance, a collection of diverse dance styles that includes both regional folk dances and dances of ethnic minority groups. In contrast to Chinese folk and ethnic dance, which emphasizes regional diversity and populism,[17] *Zhongguo gudianwu* emphasizes a unified, elite image of Chinese culture. The notion of *gudian* (古典) or "classical" in *Zhongguo gudianwu* refers to a quality of shared cultural inheritance that in theory unites all Chinese people through time and space. "The classical," writes Ye Ning, "does not disappear along with its historical period. Rather, it is passed on to future generations, becoming a treasured inheritance" (Ye 1999: 181). "Classical," argues Su Ya, a scholar specializing in *Zhongguo gudianwu* theory, "refers to a 'cultural psychology'" that has "sedimented over three to five thousand years of history. [It is] that root in the blood, body and mind of every Chinese person, long ago achieved innately, reproduced through the process of every generation" (Su 2009).

Early creators of *Zhongguo gudianwu* searched for "classical" Chinese cultural character in *xiqu* (戏曲), or Chinese indigenous theater. They saw the movement elements of performance forms such as *kunqu* and *jingju* as the most important living inheritors of ancient court dance, so they used *xiqu* forms, combined with martial arts, as the basis for training techniques and choreography. The first full-length *Zhongguo gudianwu* dance-drama, which premiered in Beijing in 1957, follows this approach. Called *Bao lian deng* (宝莲灯, Precious Lotus Lantern), it tells a story of romance between a human mortal, Liu Yanchang, and a goddess, San Sheng Mu, who meet at a mountain temple and give birth to a son, Chen Xiang. Through a series of fights involving a magic lantern, San Sheng Mu gets entrapped in a mountain by a god, Er Lang Shen, and is later rescued by her son and reunited with her lover. The entire costuming and movement aesthetic of *Bao lian deng* is strongly influenced by *xiqu.* [18] San Sheng Mu, the heroine, dresses

in long, pastel-colored robes with long sleeves and silk ribbons reminiscent of those worn by female characters in *xiqu* performance. On her head is an elaborate hairpiece decorated in flowers and beads. San Shengmu's movements include fluttering circular walking steps (*yuanchang bu* 圆场步) and dainty "orchid fingers" (*lanhuazhi* 兰花指) characteristic of female roles in *xiqu*. Her head and torso curve to form the "three curves" (*san dao wan* 三道弯) posture as her eyes move from side to side, and soft breaths (*qikou* 气口) are clearly visible in each movement. Chen Xiang uses a sword dance technique adapted from *xiqu* and martial arts, and he and the other male characters all execute signature *xiqu*-derived movements such as the raised flex foot step (*baikou bu* 摆扣步), the open fist torso figure eight (*bazi yuan* 八字圆), and the flat-handed "cloud hands" (*yunshou* 云手) air circles.

After the success of *Bao lian deng*, a new genre of dance creation emerged, known as the *minzu wuju* (民族舞剧), or "national dance-drama."[19] The Beijing Dance School and other professional dance institutions designated *Zhongguo gudianwu* as the official choreographic language for national dance-dramas, and, in 1957, the school split into two disciplines (creating programs for Chinese and Western dance-drama) explicitly for this purpose. Two other well-known early national dance-dramas premiered in 1959. They are titled *Xiao dao hui* (小刀会, Small Dagger Society)[20] and *Yu meiren* (鱼美人, The Mermaid). *Xiao dao hui* premiered in Shanghai and depicted modern revolutionary violence through a more theatrical movement vocabulary and stronger use of martial arts elements. *Yu meiren*, often known as "China's *Swan Lake*," combines Chinese dance and ballet elements to tell a fantastical story modeled after classical European ballets. All three works serve as early examples of different efforts to produce China's own style of national dance-drama. Development of *Zhongguo gudianwu* continued until 1966, when the onset of the Cultural Revolution led to a wholesale condemnation of the genre. In 1970, the Beijing Dance School closed temporarily, and *Zhongguo gudianwu* was officially criticized as "feudal," "anti-revolutionary," and "the product of 'emperors, generals and ministers, gifted scholars and beautiful ladies'" (Li et al. 2004: 57). A new dance style called revolutionary ballet (*geming balei* 革命芭蕾)—of which the two most representative works are *The Red Detachment of Women* (红色娘子军, 1964) and *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女, 1965)—temporarily replaced *Zhongguo gudianwu* as the primary language of national dance-drama.[21] The suppression of *Zhongguo gudianwu* did not last long, however. Even before the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, most dance schools and companies began making efforts to return to their pre-1966 curricula and repertoire, including the teaching and performance of *Zhongguo gudianwu*. According to

interviews with faculty, the Beijing Dance School, for example, began recruiting new students to its *Zhongguo gudianwu* program and reviving the old curriculum and repertoire as early as 1974. After 1976 the revolutionary ballet style was largely rejected among professional dancers as unsophisticated and out of date, and this attitude is still reflected in the derogatory name *tu balei,* or "local ballet," which Chinese dancers sometimes use to refer to revolutionary ballet of the Cultural Revolution period. In the post–Cultural Revolution period, *Zhongguo gudianwu* reclaimed its position as the dominant dance genre for training and choreography in Chinese dance, and in 1979 a series of new *Zhongguo gudianwu* dance-dramas[22] appeared around the country, signaling the form's nationwide revival.

In Search of Chineseness

When *Zhongguo gudianwu* was founded and established as a discipline in the 1950s and early 1960s, its practitioners placed high value on Chineseness—understood as a unified and inherited cultural essence of the nation—and they regarded its embodiment and promotion as the most important artistic goal of their work. Recalling his childhood training as a member of the first class of students at the Beijing Dance School in 1954, Xiong Jiatai (熊家泰, b. 1938), later a teacher in the *Zhongguo gudianwu* program, remembers his teachers placing strong emphasis on Chineseness, or what he calls "national characteristics" (民族特色) in class. He says,

> We used to practice to live Chinese folk music, and nearly all the movements we learned in *Zhongguo gudianwu* class were from some kind of traditional performance form, like *xiqu* and martial arts. Famous old *xiqu* and martial arts teachers would come to our school and give workshops. Our teachers always emphasized the importance of expressing Chinese characteristics in our dancing, because they said we are Chinese people, and our dancing should be Chinese too. (Xiong 2008)

In 1959, Ouyang Yuqian, the Chinese theater expert who helped found *Zhongguo gudianwu,* wrote in praise of the *xiqu* movement style: "That distinctive rhythm and elegant meter, those healthy and beautiful body shapes, that formidable expressive power . . . this is something that exists in no other place in the world" (Ouyang 1959: 350, quoted in Che 2006: 21). When elements of ballet such as piano accompaniment, barre work, and methods of training based on isolations of body parts were added to the *Zhongguo gudianwu* curriculum in the late 1950s, the decision to add these ballet elements was always explained as a "practical necessity," which was not meant to distort the fundamentally "national" character of the dance form (Li et al. 2004).

As in its early development phase, the revival period of *Zhongguo gudianwu* after the mid-1970s continued to be characterized by a concern with Chineseness as the central disciplinary value. In 1978 the Beijing Dance School was upgraded from a secondary-level professional school to an arts university and given the new name the Beijing Dance Academy. As part of this change, a new university-level bachelors program in *Zhongguo gudianwu* was developed along with new specialized courses for university students. Led by *Zhongguo gudianwu* instructor Li Zhengyi (李正一, b. 1929), teachers at the Beijing Dance Academy created a new university-level curriculum called *shenyun* (身韵), or body rhyme.[23] Like the earlier curriculum, *shenyun* was designed to teach, through movement, the cultural essence of Chinese national character. According to the official history of the discipline (Li et al. 2004), the goal in creating *shenyun* is, "Through the content of *Shenyun* classes, to grasp the unique aesthetic characteristic of our national tradition (*minzu chuantong* 民族传统), to make it manifest concretely in the movement patterns and principles of the human physique, [and] to make students, through study, master these quintessences within national traditional dance" (Li et al. 2004: 119).

Like his colleagues in the *Zhongguo gudianwu* establishment in the early 1980s, Sun Ying also sought to create a dance program oriented toward the embodiment and promotion of Chineseness understood as national culture. "As a temporary visitor among the descendents of Yan and Huang,"[24] writes Sun in the introduction to his *Collected Commentary,* "I only wish to do my meager best at this effort: to promote and vitalize national culture" (Sun 2006: 2). Throughout all of his teachings and writings, Sun returns to a single constant theme: the value of Chinese cultural tradition and the need for Chinese artists, as responsible inheritors of their own tradition, to understand, appreciate, and promote Chineseness through their work. During the 2008 master's thesis debate mentioned at the beginning of this paper, when Sun defended his student's ideas against criticisms by other faculty members, Sun continued to promote the idea of Chineseness as the basic value in *Zhongguo gudianwu.* The climactic point in Sun's argument, during which he stood up, pounded his fist on the table, and raised his voice almost to a shout, was when he stated: "The Chinese nation has the capacity to create *its own* dance form, and it is about time that we did so!"

The Controversy

If nearly all practitioners of *Zhongguo gudianwu* agree that the basic value of their discipline is Chineseness, and they agree that this notion of Chineseness is a shared, inherited quality of national culture that is capable of being embodied and promoted in dance form, then

what is the cause of the sixty years of controversy? The answer is, as in many artistic forms, that different practitioners define, interpret, and pursue the same core value in different ways. In the specific case of the Han-Tang school, Sun has a different view from most members of the *Zhongguo gudianwu* establishment of what it means to embody and promote Chineseness, and he has a different method for doing so. Most importantly, Sun feels that his understanding and his method are better that those of his critics (who of course feel that their own are better) and he feels passionately enough about his position to pursue his views and approaches against those of others literally for decades.

In distinguishing his Han-Tang school from other types of *Zhongguo gudianwu*, Sun often argues that what makes his work better is that, because it eschews ballet, it is more authentically Chinese. Comparing the basic training curriculum used in the Han-Tang program to that used in the established program in *Zhongguo gudianwu*, Sun argues that the established program is flawed because it teaches ballet methods such as pointed feet, barre exercises, and so on, whereas his does not. "Ballet is Western, not Chinese!" is the frequent refrain of Sun and his students as they defend their program against the established training system. In 2009, when Sun revived *Tongque ji* as part of the Beijing Dance Academy's fifty-fifth anniversary celebration, his press release for the work made clear his continued intention to reject ballet as a way of pursuing Chineseness. It states:

> Without the addition of ballet movements or the copying of modern dance concepts, this work utilizes a wealth of Chinese resources, in an effort to create an ethnically unique form and style, promoting a particularly Chinese kind of beauty and expounding on the sentiments of Chinese history. Amidst the current fashion of adopting Western aesthetics in the creation of dance-dramas, this work follows a different course; and in so doing it is a tribute to the great forefathers of the Chinese people. (Beijing Dance Academy 2009)

The controversy over the Han-Tang school is not over whether *Zhongguo gudianwu* should pursue Chineseness, but rather over what counts as Chineseness and how it can best be pursued. In 1986, following the production of Sun's first Han-Tang style dance-drama *Tongque ji*, a debate took place on the pages of *Wudao* (舞蹈, Dance) magazine between Sun Ying and then Beijing Dance Academy professor Gao Dakun (郜大琨, 1935–2010), in which each attacked the other for pursuing the "wrong" kind of Chineseness. In an article published in *Dance* in 1986, titled "From Inheritance and Dynamism, Discussing *Gudianwu's* Development—A Deliberation with Comrade Sun Ying,"[25] Gao promotes the so-called "integration" (*jiehe* 结合) approach to *Zhongguo*

gudianwu (the established approach of combining *xiqu*, martial arts, and ballet) and accuses Sun's approach of showing "incorrect ideas resulting in incorrect conclusions" (quoted in Sun 2006: 125). Sun's response, titled "The Grounds for Differentiation Between the Historical Periods of Natural Feet and Bound Feet—A Response to Comrade Gao Dakun," begins with a strong statement of disagreement with Gao ("I still do not agree with the 'integrated' approach!" Sun writes) and follows with an explanation of why Gao's approach is flawed (Sun 2006: 125). Sun argues that, even beyond its problematic adoption of ballet (which Sun sees as fundamentally antithetical to the project of promoting Chineseness), the integration approach is still flawed because it chooses the wrong period of Chinese history on which to base its aesthetic of Chineseness. Rather than drawing aesthetic inspiration, as the integration approach does, from the Ming-Qing era (fourteenth to twentieth century), Sun argues that aesthetic inspiration should be drawn instead from the earlier Han-Tang era, hence the name of his Han-Tang school.

As reflected in the title of his article, Sun's vision of a correct approach to Chineseness hinges on a historical distinction between two major periods in Chinese aesthetic history, what he calls the "natural feet" period and "bound feet" period. "Gao advocates using the bound foot period as the foundation; I propose using the natural foot period as the foundation," Sun summarizes (Sun 2006: 129). The natural feet period, according to Sun, takes place before the eleventh century CE, when foot binding began to be common. This early period of Chinese imperial history is dominated by three aesthetic periods: Han (206 BCE–221 CE), Wei-Jin (220–420 CE), and Tang (618–907 CE). Sun's view is that the aesthetics of the earlier natural feet period are inherently different from those of the later bound feet period, especially with regard to dance and concepts of bodily beauty. Thus, he argues that when selecting between these aesthetic sources, it is better to choose the former rather than the latter, or at the very least to attempt to draw on some aspect of all periods.

In Sun's view, the established integration approach is flawed in that it relies on *xiqu* as its primary source for indigenous Chinese bodily aesthetics. Since *xiqu* developed during the bound feet period, Sun reasons, it is infused with the aesthetics of that period. In Sun's view, this aesthetic presents an unhealthy, unpleasant, and unappealing vision of bodily beauty, what he calls *bingtai mei* (病态美), or sickly beauty. With a more full understanding of Chinese history, Sun argues, one can see that Chineseness is diverse and multilayered. His approach, he argues, is better because it shows aspects of Chinese aesthetics that are both more appealing and more representative of Chinese history as a whole. He writes:

> Why must we use the time when feudal society developed to the peak of decay, when ancient dance faced annihilation, when the laws of an empty ethical code arbitrarily imposed cruel torture on women, when the history of human civilization saw this stroke of a ruthless and barbaric history—that is, the bound feet period of the Ming and Qing eras—as our foundation? Is this the decision that resulted from research into the impact of a historical period on its art? The excellent tradition that we inherited after criticism? Is this an innovative view, a scientific attitude? (Sun 2006: 128)

At the end of this quote, Sun adopts an ironic tone, using politically charged terms such as "excellent tradition," "criticism," and "scientific attitude" to bring into question the approaches of his opponents. Gao and other supporters of the integration approach, Sun implies, claim to be knowledgeable about history and to be critical inheritors of Chinese tradition. However, his argument goes, it is only through a very historically informed and truly critical approach that one can succeed in embodying and promoting Chineseness.

In Defense of the Establishment

Supporters of the established program argue that, though perhaps not ideal, the integrated approach was a necessary outcome of a particular historical development. "History is sometimes a destiny that is forced upon us and sometimes we cannot choose it," states Wang Wei, chair of the Department of *Zhongguo gudianwu,* during an international conference of dance researchers in 2008. "Because of this history," she continues, "when New China was founded in 1949, it was a time when new things were on the horizon and the course to follow was not yet clear" (Wang Wei 2008). This argument, which is often summarized as "historical necessity" (历史必然), is dominated my two major lines of justification: first, the "broken inheritance" (*duandai* 断代) argument, and, second, the "ballet is scientific" argument. Both start from the assumption that dance as a genre was new to China in the twentieth century, and that this newness made it necessary and expedient to draw on the sources that were most readily available even if not entirely appropriate, in this case *xiqu* and ballet.

The theory of broken inheritance in Chinese dance historiography argues that court dance as a classical art form died out in China after the end of the Tang dynasty (tenth century CE), leaving dance practitioners of later generations without a clear sense of which indigenous sources could serve as models for a national dance form. In her widely read textbook of Chinese dance history Wang Kefen writes, "With the final collapse of the Tang imperial court, dance as an independent type of performance art gradually transitioned from a period

of great prosperity to one of decline. . . . Many canonical dance performance works of the preceding dynasties were lost forever" (Wang Kefen 2004: 272). In this context, the inheritance of ancient court dance was "broken," and no independent dance form existed in the twentieth century from which dancers could develop a national form. Dance practitioners seeking to create a Chinese national dance form in the twentieth century felt they had to choose between two potential sources of indigenous tradition: "living traditions" such as *xiqu,* martial arts, and folk dance, or "non-living traditions" such as ancient funerary statues, literary references, and paintings. Given this "necessity of history," the integration school argues, early practitioners of *Zhongguo gudianwu* chose the living tradition of *xiqu* as their primary source. They argued that *xiqu* had inherited the court dance tradition after the decline of the Tang and it was thus a repository of classical dance elements that, through proper study, could be excavated from it.[26] As a living tradition *xiqu* was also more readily accessible and less open to misinterpretation, and it provided a ready model for indigenous-style performance training. "*Xiqu* could be touched, seen, and studied," says Jin Hao, explaining the early choice to focus on *xiqu* during an interview in 2008. "Furthermore, *xiqu* offered a ready training system that could be adapted to dance. This was essential for the early practitioners of *Zhongguo guidanwu,* who had little idea where to start with creating a national dance training system" (Jin 2008).

The broken inheritance argument made the challenge of creating a national form in dance different from that faced in most other artistic and cultural fields in China at the time, because there was not only no independent indigenous dance form to serve as a basis, but, also, there was little indigenous concept of what constitutes dance as an art form. In visual art, for example, the national form of *guohua* (国画) adopted techniques and traditions directly from the existing practices of Chinese ink painting, thus a rich indigenous tradition existed of specific styles of painting, as well as conceptual understandings of what constitutes painting as a genre.[27] In music, there was a vast existing tradition of indigenous musical practice, which was connected to specific techniques, works, and indigenous musical instruments as well as indigenous notions of what constitutes musical practice. Theatrical performance presented a more complicated problem since in China the indigenous traditions of *xiqu* combined what in the West formed separate disciplines or fields. Dance, like spoken drama, was a category largely imported from the West.[28] In early writings on *Zhongguo gudianwu,* one frequently finds discussions of the need to expand or change elements of *xiqu* movement to fit the "needs of dance," in which dance is understood as a separate category with its own requirements. For

example, in 1953, at the end of a major investigation into *xiqu* training techniques, the Group for Research on *Zhongguo Gudianwu* led by Ye Ning reported the following conclusions:

> The development of *xiqu* has more than eight hundred years of history. It has a complete system with very rich training materials and a strict process. However, it only serves to cultivate *xiqu* performers. Dance training can absorb experience from [*xiqu* training] but cannot mechanically copy it. [We] must do our work to investigate the principles of dance technique, to peel away dance from the *chang, zuo, nian, da* (singing, doing, speaking, and fighting) of *xiqu*, and to create a new *gudianwu* form, gradually developing a dance training method. (Li et al. 2004: 7–8)

Dance is understood here as something quite distinct from *xiqu*, with different inherent characteristics and needs. Feeling that they were without an indigenous standard for what should constitute dance as an artistic endeavor, these practitioners ultimately turned to ballet as their disciplinary model.

Arguing that they had no indigenous dance tradition to use as a basis for the creation of a new national dance form, supporters of the integration school turned to ballet as the universal standard of what defines dance as an artistic form. To justify the use of a "Western" dance form in the creation of China's national dance form, *Zhongguo gudianwu* practitioners described ballet as a universally effective program for dance training and choreography that transcended boundaries of cultural aesthetics. In 1956, a series of meetings known as the "scientificity and systematicity" (科学性系统性) meetings were held at the Beijing Dance School, officially to resolve problems summarized as "a lack of mature scientificity and systematicity" in the early curriculum (Li et al. 2004: 14–15). Techniques adapted from *xiqu* and martial arts and used in the first two years of *Zhongguo gudianwu* training at the school were determined to be either physically dangerous or unsuitable for dance, and they were replaced with techniques adapted from ballet.[29] *Zhongguo gudianwu* practitioners saw ballet training methods as a universal tool for producing dancing bodies[30] and compatible with the expression of different national characteristics. Comparing the integrated training method to orchestra music, Li et al. write, "It's just like orchestra music, capable of playing both foreign and Chinese, both ancient and modern. What reflects the life of Chinese people is Chinese dance-drama, regardless of whether one stands on pointe" (Li et al. 2004: 63).

Apart from training, many of China's early dancers and critics saw ballet a universal standard in dance choreography. In 1958, shortly after the premier of *Bao lian deng*, an essay published in *Wudao* (舞蹈,

Dance) magazine criticizes the work for its "unsatisfying" partner dance scenes. "In the performances of Three Sacred Goddess and Liu Yanchang in the first scene are limited only to hand movements and miming gestures, [and] there is not a single section of partner dancing that is worthy of full enjoyment and mutual expressions of emotion" (Yu Ping 2004: 53). Reflecting on this problem, Yu Ping writes, "The criticism of the so-called 'dance' of *Bao lian deng* points out an important gap in our learning from Soviet experience in the creation of dance-dramas, that is, our lack of sufficient attention and research into the important key movement element of 'partner dance' in classical ballet" (Yu Ping 2004: 53). Here, the notion of "partner dancing" (双人舞) is adopted directly from ballet terminology, along with its expectations and standards. The "hand movements" and "miming gestures" to which the author refers in *Bao lian deng* are largely inspired by *xiqu*, whose own sophisticated technique of partnering was self-consciously adopted by the choreographers of *Bao lian deng* as a way of maintaining national character in the work. As signaled by his quotation marks around the word "dance," however, even the contemporary critic Yu Ping hesitates to categorize *xiqu* partnering as an accepted form of dance, because it does not correspond to the standards established in ballet.

Conclusion

In the early 1950s, American modern dance was on the rise internationally, aided by the support of the US government, who saw it as a pillar in the new US ideology of international universalism.[31] At the same time, in part as an explicit rejection of this American ideology,[32] the Chinese dance world in the PRC sought to create its own dance form, which was to be characterized not by universalism but rather by cultural distinctiveness. The history of *Zhongguo gudianwu*, China's "national" dance form, is the history of an invented tradition, though one with a different genealogy and a different set of cultural logics than those described in Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) classic study. Practitioners of *Zhongguo gudianwu* have always recognized their work to be the creation of something new, and it is precisely this process of creation that they see as most valuable for effectively inheriting and promoting cultural distinctiveness. "We need to make the forms of traditional dance art and the realities of new life and new characters combine together, to form a new content and a new form," writes Ch'oe (Cui) in 1951 (Cui 2004 [1951]: 189–190), in what is recognized as the first published paper on *Zhongguo gudianwu*. Summarizing the development of the field through the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jin Hao writes, "A new breed of dance, born out of the maternal body of greater Chinese culture, [*Zhongguo gudianwu*] expresses contemporary

Chinese dance practitioners' creative spirit and their new interpretation and aesthetic pursuit of traditional culture" (Jin 2007: 1).

As an explicitly creative and inventive endeavor, the pursuit of Chineseness in contemporary Chinese classical dance engendered ongoing and fierce controversies, within which personal, political, and artistic relationships are mutually entangled. Over sixty years, the main cast of characters involved in the making of *Zhongguo gudianwu* has remained largely unchanged, and the personal histories, preferences, and ambitions of these individuals shapes the field and the controversies that emerge out of it. At the master's thesis defense in 2008, the faculty members sitting on Sun Ying's left and right included choreography instructor Xiao Suhua (肖苏华, b. 1937), who studied ballet in the Soviet Union as a child before coming to the Beijing Dance School in 1954, and Wang Wei (王伟, b. 1960), who gained her early dance training performing the revolutionary ballets of the Cultural Revolution, when Sun and others were working in reeducation camps. Ouyang Yuqian, the Chinese theater expert who helped found the field of *Zhongguo gudianwu,* was himself a highly accomplished performer of *kunqu* opera, one of the main *xiqu* forms used to develop *xiqu*-style *Zhongguo gudianwu.* Gao Dakun, the *Zhongguo gudianwu* instructor who argued with Sun Ying on the pages of *Wudao* (Dance) magazine in 1986 was an old classmate of Sun Ying's from the 1951–1952 course with Wu Xiaobang. In 1957, when Sun was labeled a Rightist and forced to leave the Beijing Dance School, Gao, then only a young recent graduate, took over as head of the Research and Teaching Group in *Zhongguo gudianwu.* Gao led the writing of the first curriculum for the integrated program (Beijing Dance School Gudianwu Teaching and Research Group 1960), and he performed the lead role in the 1961 restaging of *Yu meiren,* "China's *Swan Lake.*"

These personal histories and relationships alone do not explain why the Han-Tang school emerged as a discipline in the 1980s or why arguments over Chineseness remained persistent for more than sixty years in the field of Chinese dance and continue to divide and animate the field today. Yet, such disciplinary debates and the choreographic and instructional innovations that arise out of them are part of the complex phenomenon that is *Zhongguo gudianwu,* an artistic form whose historical development and logics of creative practice are simultaneously political, cultural, aesthetic, and personal. *Zhongguo gudianwu* is a product of socialist China, just as it is a product of the individual artistic efforts and visions of those who have and continue to participate in its creation. As a national dance form whose core artistic value is the embodiment and preservation of Chineseness, *Zhongguo gudianwu* values the production and recognition of cultural distinctive-

ness. However, the notion of cultural distinctiveness that it promotes is one that is at once historicized and diverse. Within the field of *Zhongguo gudianwu,* no one could argue that Chineseness does not exist. Yet, to promote a new interpretation of Chineseness and to argue about existing interpretations is both possible and expected. This process of ongoing debate and invention, which practitioners of *Zhongguo gudianwu* see as both a form of research and a form of creative practice, is the very engine of creativity that drives the field of *Zhongguo gudianwu.*

NOTES

1. Formerly the Beijing Dance School, the Beijing Dance Academy was founded in 1954 as the first professional dance school in the People's Republic of China. Between March 2008 and November 2009, I spent eighteen months living and studying as a visiting graduate student at the Academy as part of a multiyear ethnographic fieldwork project investigating the lives and works of professional dancers in the PRC. Funding for this project was provided by the US Fulbright Foundation, the University of California Pacific Rim Research Program, and the Blakemore Foundation. For a more detailed discussion of the methods used in this research, and its broader conclusions, see Wilcox (2011).

2. Biographical information on Sun's life presented here is a composite from multiple sources, including personal interviews with Sun and his students, autobiographic essays (Sun 2005, 2010b), and fieldwork in the program in Han-Tang Gudianwu at the Beijing Dance Academy.

3. For an overview of the Dance Cadre Training Course, including detailed accounts of individual participants and their experiences, see Tian and Li (2005).

4. For Wu Xiaobang's autobiography, see Wu (1982).

5. For a compilation of Sun's articles, see Sun (2006).

6. This English translation is from Jiang (2007). I have also translated the title elsewhere as *Sorrows of the Tongque Stage* (Wilcox 2011).

7. Translations from Chinese sources are the author's own, unless otherwise noted.

8. Jiang (2007) leaves *Ta ge* untranslated.

9. For a video, see *Ta ge* (1996). For history and analysis of the work, see Su (2004).

10. Similar movements to produce national forms occurred in other fields. See discussions on national forms in twentieth-century Chinese literature and painting in Lee (2002) and Andrews (1994), respectively.

11. The shortened term *Zhongguo minzuwu* (中国民族舞) is often used among professional dancers to refer to Chinese ethnic minority dance. This produces some confusion because the same term is also sometimes used as a synonym for the umbrella term "Chinese dance." The confusion derives from

the ambivalence of the term *minzu* (民族), which is used to refer both to minority groups (as in the term *Zhongguo minzu wudao* for "Chinese minority ethnic dance") as well as to a larger conception of Chinese culture or nationality (as in the term *minzuxing* for "Chineseness"). For greater clarity, I use the longer term *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wudao* here to refer to ethnic minority dance, highlighting the use of the term *minzu* to refer to Chinese national culture.

12. The term "modern dance" is usually preferred to "contemporary dance" in China when referring to Western-style modern or contemporary dance. This preference comes from the fact that the literal Chinese translation for "contemporary dance" (*dangdaiwu* 当代舞) has historically been used to refer to Chinese military dance.

13. Note that there is no category in the Chinese dance epistemology for "world dance," a typically Western concept. There have been multiple movements in the Chinese dance community, however, to create a category called *dongfang wudao* (东方舞蹈) or "Eastern dance," which includes non-Chinese, non-Western dance forms, including South Asian dance, Southeast Asian dance, Japanese dance, Korean dance, and so on. Additionally, Chinese troupes traveling internationally have sometimes performed dance forms associated with Africa. Soviet ballet and folk dance is resolutely considered "Western" in the Chinese dance categorization system. Although Middle Eastern and Latin dance forms such as samba and belly dance are increasingly popular in China, they are also frequently described as part of the larger category of "Western" dance.

14. See explanation in Li et al. (2004).

15. For the authoritative history of the founding of *Zhongguo gudianwu*, see Li et al. (2004). For a summary of extant research materials on early *gudianwu* see Che (2006).

16. Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi is known primarily in English-language scholarship as an internationally famous Korean dancer under the Japanese empire (Van Zile 2001; Park 2006). Her work in China in the early 1950s left a tremendous impact on *Zhongguo gudianwu*, and her curriculum for Chinese-style Korean folk dance is still used in many folk dance programs in China as well.

17. On the importance of regional diversity and populism as central tenets in Chinese folk and ethnic dance in the PRC, see Chang (2008), Fairbank (2008), and Hung (2011).

18. For a video of the 1959 film production of the work, see *Bao lian deng* (1959).

19. Yu (2004) provides an excellent overview of the history of the national dance-drama in China.

20. Jiang (2007) translates the title as *Small Knives Society*.

21. For English-language studies of Chinese revolutionary ballet, see Chen (2002), Cheng (2000), Christopher (1979), Roberts (2008), Snow (1972), and Swift (1973).

22. Examples include *Wencheng Gongzhu* (文城公主, Princess Wencheng) and *Si Lu Hua Yu* (丝路花雨, Flower Rains Along the Silk Road).

23. Note that this is different from and not related to *Shenyun* (神韵),

the internationally touring Chinese cultural show that performs around the United States.

24. Reference is to Yandi and Huangdi, mythical ancestors of the Chinese people.

25. Chinese article title: "从继承性与流动性谈古典舞的发展——与孙颖通知商榷."

26. Ch'oe Sŭng-hŭi (Cui 2004 [1951]) provides the first account of this method of excavating classical dance from *xiqu.*

27. For an account of the *guohua* (国画) movement, see Andrews (1994).

28. Chen (2010) discusses the adaptation of spoken drama as a Western form in early twentieth-century China.

29. The meetings were presided over by visiting Soviet ballet instructors, whose influence on the entire workings of the Beijing Dance School were pervasive from the time the school opened in 1954 until the Sino-Soviet split in 1960.

30. A similar type of universality was applied to Western classical music during and after the May Fourth era (Jones 2001).

31. For an excellent discussion of the ideology of universalism in American modern dance and its connection to US foreign policy in the 1950s, see Kowal (2010).

32. On the politics of modern dance in China, see Ou (1995).

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